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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHMOS
DE RUEHKUK #0095/01 1111308
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 211308Z APR 06
FM REO KIRKUK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0627
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0589
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHKUK/REO KIRKUK 0655

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIRKUK 000095

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/21/2016

TAGS: [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KCOR](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: STUDENT UNIONS MAKE DEMANDS TO KRG ON HALABJAH DETAINEES

REF: A) KIRKUK 80, B) KIRKUK 79, C) KIRKUK 78

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CLASSIFIED BY: JBIGUS, PRT LEADER, REO Kirkuk, DoS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Students from Halabjah and As Sulaymaniyah issued a list of demands to the KRG following the violent protests in Halabjah (REFTELS), because detained protestors were being denied fundamental rights. They told REO April 8 that they might go on strike or organize peaceful demonstrations if the KRG did not respond by April 15. The students blamed the KRG, security forces, and the protestors (in that order) for turning the Halabjah demonstrations violent. They claimed the KRG was not a democracy, because the KDP and PUK manipulated its justice system. They complained the political parties funded and controlled KRG student and women's unions in order to monitor student activities. END SUMMARY.

Demands in Response to Halabjah

¶2. (C) Acting RC and IPAO on April 8 met with two students from Halabjah and three students from As Sulaymaniyah - representing five Kurdish student unions - to discuss their demands of the KRG following the violent protests in Halabjah on March 16. Demands included releasing those detained as a result of the protests as soon as possible; facilitating a transparent investigation and trial of the security officer who killed a 17-year-old student; permitting local and international NGO's to visit detainees; permitting representatives of student and youth unions to visit detainees; restoring a peaceful atmosphere by changing KRG language from pressure to understanding; and allowing representatives from student and youth unions to attend reconstruction meetings in Halabjah.

¶3. (C) The student unions issued their demands because the detainees were being denied fundamental rights (REFTEL A). They also noted that while the students who participated in the protests remained in hiding, the KRG had not issued any type of amnesty policy. The protestors remained scared because the PUK security forces continued to arrest alleged perpetrators.

¶4. (C) The student unions sent their demands to the KRG's Council of Ministers, the KRG Interior Minister, and the Confederation of Student Unions. They said the KRG had not responded yet to the demands, noting that if the unions had not heard anything by April 15, they would regroup and devise a plan of action. Possible next steps included going on strike or planning peaceful demonstrations.

All Groups Erred, but KRG Takes Most Blame

¶15. (C) Our interlocutors said that the March 16 Halabjah demonstrations were legal, but some groups used the demonstrations to commit crimes. The students argued that the KRG deserved most of the blame, followed by the security forces, then the Halabjah residents. The Students admitted that student unions could be blamed for two key components. First, the student protestors lacked a fundamental understanding of how to demonstrate peacefully. Second, the student unions did not coordinate on controlling the demonstrations.

Halabjah Residents Undaunted by Security Response

¶16. (C) The students claimed that if the U.S. had a city with Halabjah-like conditions, the residents would demonstrate daily, and warned that if the KRG did not get serious about improving the city, the people would protest again. They said that when the KRG Deputy Prime Minister visited Halabjah to discuss the situation, an older man stood up and warned that if the KRG did not start delivering on its promises, the older villagers "next time will rise up and it will be worse." The students complained how the U.S. in 1988 did not respond to Saddam's attacks, yet it used Halabjah as part of its justification to oust the Ba'athist regime 15 years later.

KRG Not a Democracy

¶17. (C) The students said the Halabjah protests marked a turning point in democratic expression in the KRG. They argued that the Kurdish people now would look to Halabjah when reacting to future injustices. The students noted, however, that the Kurdistan region was not a democracy, and that public demonstrations only were possible because of the Coalition presence. If the Americans withdrew, KRG security forces would crush future protestors. Nonetheless, the students expected the

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KRG would make changes as a result of the Halabjah protests. They noted, for example, the PUK already had changed its party leader in Halabjah.

¶18. (C) The students stressed the need for a fair KRG justice system. They complained that the KRG's courts were manipulated by the KDP and PUK. The Kurdish parties maintained the former regime's legal system. Trials, if administered, were neither fair nor transparent. One student noted that Soran Kamal, a student of Salah ad Din University in Arbil, had been jailed for a year and seven months, without a trial. Another student claimed the KRG at times had detained individuals for years before realizing it had the wrong person.

Parties Monitor Students Via Student Unions

¶19. (C) The students complained that the political parties funded KRG student and women's unions and therefore controlled them. They argued that the parties prohibited unions from becoming independent because unions were the means by which the parties monitored student activities. They complained that the political parties laid traps to catch students writing and speaking out against the government. One student said two of his friends were jailed for writing an article that defamed one of the parties. Another student claimed KRG security forces several times had attacked his student union building in an effort to shut it down.

Comment

¶10. (C) The PUK's track record of ignoring public demands suggests the students' demands will have little impact. These young leaders were articulate and organized in their complaints

against the KRG, and appeared to understand the negative impact of violent demonstrations. They represent a new forward-looking, educated generation in Iraqi Kurdistan that is disillusioned with political party practices. This is the second group of students we met this week that stressed the great divide that exists between their generation and the party leaders.

BIGUS